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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000883

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SARG DISMISSES SHEIKHS FROM LEADERSHIP POSITIONS
IN CHARITABLE ISLAMIC SOCIETIES ON SUSPICIONS OF TERRORIST
FUNDING.

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00677

[B](#). DAMASCUS 00814

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The SARG quietly ordered religious sheikhs who sit on the boards of non-governmental, charitable, Islamic "foundations" to resign their positions during the month of November. One civil society activist, who first broke the news to us, claimed the SARG feared these organizations might have financial links with anti-regime terrorist cells in Syria. Other interlocutors have said no such connection exists. The SARG also attempted to deport all foreign students studying at private Islamic schools, but a coalition of sheikhs succeeded in reversing the decision. END SUMMARY.

SARG Suspected Linkages to Fatah al-Islam

[1](#)2. (C) In an orchestrated spectacle meant to galvanize public opinion around SARG policies and bolster the government's claim that Syria is a victim--not a sponsor--of terrorism, Syrian television aired confessional interviews on November 6 of twelve Syrian members of Fatah al-Islam who allegedly provided operational assistance in the September 27 car-bomb attack in Damascus (refs A & B). Soon after the confessions aired, the SARG began investigating the finances of independent Islamic foundations around the country, according to civil society activist Fawaz Tello (strictly protect), on grounds that two of the terrorists had studied at one of the Islamic charity's schools and another stated he had accepted money from one of the charities.

[1](#)3. (C) Tello told us that the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA) instructed the foundations to channel all future financial contributions through the government's Ministry of Religious Endowments for the purposes of monitoring and disbursement. At the same time, the MLSA summoned to their offices religious sheikhs serving as board members. All were "asked" to resign. According to Tello, some of the sheikhs, many of whom had strong connections with SARG officials, initially balked at the request only later to find themselves being instructed to do so by Syrian intelligence officers. Tello added the SARG had taken similar actions in Aleppo and other cities throughout the country. Following these incidents, Tello stated, many of the sheikhs "were angry and bad mouthing the regime" in public. Within a week Asad himself called them to the palace to quell their dissent, informing them that "this is my

policy."

Sheikhs Circumspect in Their Descriptions of SARG Actions

14. (C) Sheikh Salah Kuftaro (strictly protect), a moderate Islamist with the Abu Nour/Kuftaro Foundation, confirmed to us that the MLSA had asked him and other religious sheikhs to resign and to appoint "civilian" replacements from the foundations' general memberships to assume the vacant positions. He added that the SARG's actions had no connection to the Fatah al-Islam arrests in October. He did not give any other justification for the dismissals, however.

15. (C) In a move that seemed to belie Kuftaro's claim that the forced resignations were unrelated to Fatah al-Islam terrorism, SARG security forces also attempted to deport all new and first-year foreign students studying at private foundation-sponsored institutes--namely, Kuftaro, al-Fatah, and Bader Edin al-Hasani. In an effort to reverse the policy, Sheikhs Salah Kuftaro, Osama al-Rifai, Rateb Nabulsi, Hussam Farfour, and Said Ramadan al-Bouti appealed directly to President Asad in a meeting that also included the Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ahmed Bader Hassoun, and the Minister of Endowments, Dr. Mohammed Abdul-Sattar.

16. (C) During the meeting, Kuftaro claimed, he and the other sheikhs successfully persuaded Asad to change course on the deportations. He said Asad ultimately agreed with the sheikhs' argument that these students were "ambassadors for

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Syria and represent safety valves in their communities," and by allowing them to remain in their schools, they avoided the risk of these students becoming "fundamentalists and Wahhabis." In the course of the meeting, the president also reportedly assured Sheikh Farfour that the SARG was not targeting the al-Fatah Institute per se. Asad implied that the SARG had "edited" the televised confessions to spare the institute any embarrassment or loss of credibility with the public, Kuftaro told us.

SARG Aims for Ultimate Oversight

17. (C) Sunni Islamic leaders are at loggerheads with the Ministry of Religious Endowments (MORE) and the Grand Mufti, according to Kuftaro. He reasoned MORE and the Grand Mufti would like to take these charitable foundations "under their cloaks," thereby stripping away their independence and folding them into the SARG's bureaucracy. Tello told us that these charities provide significant financial assistance to the local poor and should government interference impede the normal distribution of funds to the needy, "this will create extremism."

18. (C) COMMENT: The SARG's move to sideline several of Syria's most prominent moderate Sunni Imams reflects longstanding reservations among the security services about the autonomy of these organizations. SARG concerns about Saudi penetration and financing of these foundations is also another probable factor behind the move. Though Kuftaro and others have consistently championed moderate and regime-friendly messages and programs, the September 27 attack may have provided rival factions within the SARG an irresistible pretext to take over their popular, well-funded, and wide-ranging charity foundations. Asad's willingness to permit foreign students to remain, and to be swayed by the Sheikhs' arguments, shows he may not have lost all faith in the moderate philosophy of these foundations. At the very least, he appears to recognize singling out Sunni organizations with too heavy a hand would invite more dissent from the Sunni majority. END COMMENT.
CONNELLY